DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 680 EA 028 789

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Matthews, L. Joseph |
| TITLE | Alternative Schedules: Blocks to Success? |
| INSTITUTION | National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, VA. |
| PUB DATE | 1997-10-00 |
| NOTE | 9p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1537; phone: 703-860-0200; fax: 703-476-5432; World Wide Web: http://www.nassp.org ($2 for members; $3 for nonmembers; quantity discounts; payment must accompany orders of $15 or less). |
| PUB TYPE | Collected Works - Serials (022) |
| JOURNAL CIT | NASSP Practitioner; v24 n1 p1-8 Oct 1997 |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Alternate Day Schedules; *Block Scheduling; *Class Organization; *Flexible Scheduling; High Schools; Program Implementation; *School Organization; Secondary Education; *Time Blocks; Trimester System |

ABSTRACT

Secondary school administrators must carefully consider the ramifications of a proposed alternative scheduling plan before proceeding with implementation. The first article in this newsletter presents findings from a study that compared data from two groups of schools (one group with a 4 X 4 block plan and the other with a trimester plan) to data from a group of schools that followed a traditional schedule. Six guidelines are offered for the successful implementation of an alternative schedule: (1) involve all members of the school community; (2) employ a researcher and/or program evaluator; (3) do not become the defender of one kind of scheduling plan; (4) keep communication open among all parties; (5) consider extensive staff development on instructional strategies; and (6) be creative and innovative. The second article describes the experiences of two high schools that took steps to ensure a smooth transition--Springfield Township High School, located in Erdenheim, Pennsylvania (a 4 X 4 block plan) and Hononegah Community High School, in Rockton, Illinois (a 7 X 1 extended period). Five figures are included. (The first article contains 7 references). (LMI)

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NASSP
# PRACTITIONER
VOL. 24 NO. 1 THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE ON-LINE ADMINISTRATOR OCTOBER 1997

ED 413 680

# Alternative Schedules: Blocks to Success?

Secondary school administrators across the country continue to explore, implement, and assess alternative class scheduling plans. The need for alternative schedules has arisen because administrators are asked to provide a heavier academic curriculum with higher graduation requirements and to integrate new curricular areas such as technology. Unfortunately, too many schools are now in the paths of retreat and regrouping because of a schedule change that was not fully planned or assessed before implementation. To prevent this trend, school administrators must carefully consider the ramifications of a proposed alternative scheduling plan before proceeding.

> *...schools need release from the rigid time requirements that dictate the length and frequency of classes, serving as barriers to flexibility. Legislatures and state education agencies should reassess prevailing regulations to allow such changes. In this way...schools can more readily base the amount of time devoted to a course on what a student learns and how long it takes him or her to accomplish that learning.*
>
> — *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, p. 48

## Implementation Issues

Various periodicals have featured articles that support alternative schedules, touting the advantages that proponents have seen with a new schedule. Some of these alternative plans' benefits have included increased student grades (Aguilera, 1996), a better school climate (Buckman, King, and Ryan, 1995), options for early graduation (Edwards, 1995), higher graduation rates (Hottenstein and Malatesta, 1993), and better student management because of fewer class changes and interruptions (Mutter, Chase, and Nichols, 1997). While some schools have benefitted from alternative schedules, it is not necessarily the case that all schools will benefit from such scheduling arrangements. In fact, one problem that has occurred with the current alternative schedule movement has been the lack of assessment and research performed prior to plan implementation. Numerous claims of success are being made without substantiation and without adequate long-term assessment. The emergence of some alternative schedules–especially the block 4 x 4–has significantly increased the types of scheduling plans. According to Hackmann (1995), more than 40 percent of the nation's high schools were using some form of block scheduling.

To study the implementation of these alternative schedules, data from high schools that changed to alternative scheduling plans were collected and compared to data from high schools with traditional schedules. Although most schools that changed to alternative schedules related positive results, each also reported problems with implementation and ongoing concerns with the new schedules. For comparison purposes, I categorized the schools into the following groups:

- Group A. These schools used the traditional six or seven-period plan. Students attended six or seven classes of 45–55 minutes per day for the school year, with a possible class change each semester.

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- Group B. These schools used the 4 x 4 block schedules, either with a semester block plan or an A–B rotation schedule. In the semester block plan, students took four classes for one semester and another four classes the second semester. In the A–B rotation plan, students took eight classes—four classes every day, alternating the remaining four classes every other day for the entire school year. Both block plans had class lengths of 80 to 90 minutes.
- Group C. These schools used the trimester scheduling plan. Students took five classes in each of three terms (typically referred to as trimesters). Each class was approximately 70 minutes in length. Class changes occurred every trimester. A traditional year-long class—such as algebra I—was a two-trimester course.

## Emerging Problems

Although the alternative schedules had advantages over the traditional schedule, several problems emerged when schedule changes were implemented.

### Teaching Methods

Most teachers were accustomed to teaching in blocks of 40 to 50 minutes. Schools using the block and trimester schedules had extended class time, necessitating a change in teaching methods. Often, teachers continued to teach classes without altering the format used in the traditional schedule. This left significant periods of "down time" within a class period. Those teachers who made use of the extra time also found they needed to adjust their methods to include more and different instructional activities.

### Instructional Time

Teachers who continued to teach in the traditional mode covered less subject matter due to the decrease in instructional time. For example, in a school in Group B, an Algebra I teacher normally covered 27 units in algebra with the traditional schedule. When the school moved to a block plan, the teacher had covered only 21 units; no allowance had been made for the decrease in total instructional time during the year.

A few simple calculations suggested that instructional time differed among the various schedules. For example, a school in Group B had 1,080 fewer minutes of instruction time per period for the year than did a school in Group A. Another school in Group C had 600 fewer minutes of instruction time. Supporters of alternative schedules often suggest that significant time is lost while performing managerial tasks such as attendance taking. Even with allowing 5 minutes for the performance of such a task for each class period, the calculations still suggested more instructional time per period with schools in Group A than in the other two groups.

### Class Offerings

A positive aspect of alternative schedules is providing students with more opportunities to take more courses. Schools in Groups B and C had to add more courses for students. Schools in Group A tended to add courses only occasionally, and then mostly due to the demands of technology. Group B and C schools needed to add new courses, especially electives—which affected teacher hiring practices. (One principal in a Group B school indicated the need to hire more teachers in elective areas.) Students, as they fulfilled their core requirements, opted to take additional electives because of the increased number of periods.

### Teacher Preparation Time

Schools differed in how each handled the preparation time of teachers. Most teachers in Group A schools were allowed one period for preparation of the six or seven total periods. Teachers in Group B schools who used the 4 x 4 block schedule were allowed one period for preparation for every block of four courses; those teachers using the A–B rotating block plans—teaching eight courses over two days—were allowed two preparation periods. Teachers in Group C schools were usually allowed one period for preparation of the five total periods. Teachers in Group B schools had approximately 6,480 more minutes of preparation time per year than did teachers in Group A schools. Likewise, teachers in Group C schools had approximately 3,420 more minutes of preparation time than did teachers in Group A schools. The differences in preparation time affected class loads.

### Class Loads

Although preparation time is vitally important for proper instruction, under most funding formulas, class loads are affected by the amount of preparation time given to teachers. Teachers in Group A schools were in contact with students six out of seven class periods—about 85.7 percent of the time. Teachers in Group B schools were in contact with students six out of eight periods—about 75 percent of the time. Teachers in Group C schools were in contact with students four out of five periods—about 80 percent of the time. Consequently, the class loads were higher in both Group B and C schools. In an effort to reduce class loads, one principal in a Group B school unsuccessfully petitioned the district office for additional faculty members. The petition had an adverse effect as district office personnel became aware of the expense involved in keeping class loads down due to block schedules. Although the schedules in schools in Groups B are often popular with teachers because of the additional preparation time it afforded them, the "price" for the additional time is often heavier student loads or budgeting for salaries for additional teachers.

### Special Course Concerns

As with most innovations, some teachers appeared to experience more problems with the change from traditional to alternative schedules than did others. Advanced Placement teachers expressed more concerns about the reduction in instructional time than did others. Music teachers in both Group B and C schools expressed concerns about the lack of continuity by not having students on a daily basis. Foreign language teachers in a Group C school expressed concerns about retention of language skills when students had an intervening term between the course work.

### Attendance Issues

Teachers in schools in Groups B and C often expressed concerns regarding student absences and make-up assignments. An absent student missed more course work per absence with an alternative schedule than with a traditional schedule. More make-up work because of the absences was also reported as a concern.

## Steps to Success

The aforementioned problems do not necessarily indicate that traditional schedules are more advantageous than alternative schedules. Alternative schedules may provide solutions to some problems that educators have experienced with traditional schedules. Awareness of the issues is a key factor in the positive implementation of an alternative schedule. Evidence suggests those schools that had administrators and policymakers who collaboratively introduced an alternative scheduling plan were more successful with such plans than were those who introduced such plans in an autocratic manner.

How can school administrators successfully implement an alternative schedule? The following guidelines may be helpful:

1. *Involve all members of the school community in a collaborative decision-making process.* A schedule change is a dramatic move for most individuals, especially for teachers in some disciplines. Be sure to involve individuals such as students, parents, and teachers in a cross-section of disciplines—band and choir teachers, foreign language teachers, and math teachers—in the decision-making process. Seek their opinions in the planning stage to avoid hearing their criticisms after plan implementation.
2. *Employ a researcher and/or program evaluator.* University staff members are typically willing to assist with evaluation. Some scheduling plans offer good research topics for graduate students. Do no overlook the importance of collecting baseline data on the existing schedule. Too often schools have made schedule changes that, due to lack of data, cannot be adequately compared to the traditional plan.
3. *Do not become the defender of one kind of scheduling plan.* Be open-minded. Carefully consider the various scheduling plans and realistically consider how each plan will work in a particular school setting. Be especially careful with plans that seem to work in neighboring schools—not all that glitters is gold.
4. *Keep communication open among all parties.* Ensure that everyone knows the advantages and the disadvantages of each plan. For example, if class loads are going to increase with a certain plan, state this up front.
5. *Consider extensive staff development on instructional strategies.* Consider how instruction will differ with alternative schedules.
6. *Be creative and innovative.* Perhaps a given plan will work better in your school setting with a little massaging. One helpful way to be more creative is to be more accepting of others' ideas and then seek a way to use those ideas in the plan. The "best" scheduling plan has yet to be discovered.

## Conclusion

Although scheduling is only one aspect of schools' retooling efforts to provide better instruction, it is an important step that directly affects most every member of the school community. School administrators must be aware of problems and concerns so that plan implementation will be less stressful on all parties.

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While some schools have experienced difficulties with alternative schedules, two schools—Springfield Township High School and Hononegah Community High School—have taken steps to ensure a smooth transition from a traditional schedule to an alternative schedule.

## To Illustrate:

- **Springfield Township High School**
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Shortly after I was appointed assistant principal of Springfield Township High School, I began studying scheduling formats that would best meet the needs of the students in our community, focusing on improving the entire school culture. Locally, at least three other school districts had begun operating on forms of a basic 4 x 4 block under names such as intensive, block, or immersion models. I read any and all literature I could find—which was not much—on alternative scheduling.

Concurrently, our school district was investing a great deal of money in technology. The district technology plan called for computers on every teacher's desk and additional investments in computer and technology labs. The Internet was fast becoming a viable resource for students and teachers both as a research and communications tool. A new scheduling model was needed to provide for its use. The delivery of instruction needed to change to respond to the needs of the quickly changing world. The attention being given to theories on multiple intelligences, the vast amount of research being reported as a result of brain studies and learning, the global economy, the lightning-paced changes in technology, the Internet, the charter schools movement, vouchers, choice, and the like clearly indicated that public schools had to change. I believed we needed time to study the changes rather than reacting without research as to the best practices.

### Focused Study Group

Midyear, all staff members who were interested in having a dialogue about alternative schedules were invited to a meeting. After this initial meeting, all staff members were invited to join a focused study group to examine the various aspects of the different types of alternative schedules. The invitation attracted approximately 20 percent of the teaching staff who, fortunately, represented a cross-section of disciplines from both core academics and special areas. The group comprised administrators, teachers, parents, and a school board member. The principal and a parent, who was also a school board member, were members of the study group. I facilitated the group's study.

The first meeting of the study group was dedicated to setting up the format for dialogue and scheduling meeting times agreeable to all group members; I distributed the beginning research materials to be read by the next meeting. We agreed to meet twice a month, once after school and once in the evening. This arrangement worked well and meetings were productive. By the end of the year, the group had in their possession an extensive handbook of research on block scheduling, had visited other block scheduled high schools, and had attended workshops and conferences—one with Robert Canady.

The group read the research and studies and also looked at our own school profile—number of student and teacher absences, S.A.T. scores, higher level math enrollment, A.P. test scores, and higher level foreign language enrollments. We looked at how we taught, what we taught, the issue of "covering the material," issues of retention, and what we believed students should be able to do by the time they graduate high school. The issue of support for the staff was a central issue as staff development had traditionally been one-shot, hit-or-miss propositions. Our research exposed the same areas of concern that study groups in other schools had questioned—Advanced Placement courses and music performing groups. I was determined to create a model that would support these two areas. At the study group's final meeting, consensus was reached for the move to an alternative schedule at Springfield Township High School.

During the 1996–97 school year, all staff members were given the liberty during the school day to visit other block-scheduled schools to meet with teachers, spend time working on lesson plans or curriculum, and involve themselves in any other activities that would contribute to increasing their comfort level in making the change. As the year was drawing to a close, I began to build the block schedule model.

### Model Development

***Student considerations.*** We had ruled out an A/B alternative schedule for the entire school early on. However, our research continued to show a high level of concern for certain areas—Advanced Placement and music courses—within a basic 4 x 4 block. It was within these areas that we chose to focus and to which we gave the most attention. Our goal was to do everything possible to make these areas successful. We also knew there had to be a

mechanism in place to allow for the ongoing support of the staff.

We believe that vocal and instrumental music groups need to have year-long participation opportunities. Our visits to other schools yielded negative opinions about block scheduling where these courses were divided into two semesters and selected as such. There were drastic reductions in the number of students able to be scheduled. We were aware of factors, based on previous scheduling experiences, that denied students the ability to schedule particular courses—other singletons, required courses, and Advanced Placement and honors courses. Because we are a small school (with 750 students enrolled in grades 8–12), the number of singletons were high. However, we were fortunate in that we were going from a seven-period day to a 4 x 4 block, which is essentially an eight-period equivalent. This benefited us by allowing courses to spread into an additional period.

Considering the information gained by our research, we structured the Advanced Placement courses to meet in configurations that would promote the opportunity for success by the students and provide the comfort level needed by the staff to operate within an intensive and accelerated scheduling model. This model was intertwined with the model we designed to accommodate the musical performing groups to minimize conflicts.

We knew that the performing groups drew a lot of their membership from the pool of students who might be eligible for the Advanced Placement courses. We also knew that other music courses—the non-performing variety—were always singletons. The music program design allowed us to create a performing arts block in which band, choir, and theater classes were scheduled every other day at the same time, set off against music theory and musical theater classes. The model allows teachers to share students in all the courses (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Block B Performing Arts Cycle**

| Block B | Day 1 | Day 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher A | Band | Music Theory |
| Teacher B | Choir | Music Theater |
| Teacher C | Theater | Music Theater |

No Advanced Placement courses were scheduled during the performing arts block. A.P. courses were scheduled as shown in Figure 2. The attention to time given to the Advanced Placement courses was such that calculus, biology, and U.S. history (grade 11) increased by 100 percent. The amount of time decided upon for the A.P.

**Figure 2. Schedule of advance placement cources**

| BLOCK A | BLOCK B | BLOCK C | BLOCK D |
|---|---|---|---|
| A.P. English<br>Every-other-day<br>All year long<br>(2 sections - 1 with those students taking A.P. European History) | Peforming Arts Cycle<br>Every-other-day<br>All year long<br>**No A.P. courses scheduled during Block B** | A.P. Biology<br>Every day<br>All year long<br>(1 section) | A.P. Calculus<br>Every day<br>All year long<br>(1 section) |
| A.P. European History<br>Every-other-day<br>All year long<br>(1 section) | | | |
| A.P. U.S. History<br>Everyday<br>All year long<br>(1 section Grade 11) | | | |

courses was a result of dialogue with both students and teachers. The amount of credit and weight given (we have a system of weighted grades) was adjusted. Our expectation is that students, teachers, and test scores will benefit from the design.

***Staff considerations.*** Staff development remained the final piece on which I concentrated prior to putting the block schedule into place. It was important that staff development be ongoing, supportive, and comfortable for everyone. Additionally, collaboration among teachers was important. I wanted to ensure that teachers engaged in

**Figure 3. Weekly Schedule of Collaboration and Staff Development**

**Semester 1**
**Week of:**

| | A1 | A2 | B1 | B2 | C1 | C2 | D1 | D2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **M** | | *COLL.* Group I | | | *S.D.* Group IV | *COLL.* Group V | *S.D.* Group VI | *COLL.* Group VII |
| **W** | *S.D.* Group I | | *S.D.* Group II | *COLL.* Group III | | | *S.D.* Group VII | *COLL.* Group VIII |
| **F** | | | *S.D.* Group III | *COLL.* Group II | *S.D.* Group V | *COLL.* Group IV | *S.D.* Group VIII | *COLL.* Group VI |

Key: A1 – First half of Block A; A2 – Second half of Block A; S.D. – Staff Development; Coll. – Collaboration

dialogue, discussing such items as lesson plan design, the use of various teaching strategies, new assessment models, and so on. It was decided that teachers would engage in collaboration and staff development activities in groups of not more than seven teachers (see Figure 3).

The intention of the building administration was that the staff would have no more than three teaching blocks on any given day. We received board approval to hire aides for cafeteria duty, in-school suspension duty, and study hall duty so only teachers without the full three block teaching load would assist with the duty responsibilities. This schedule allows for 88 minutes of time each day without teaching/duty responsibilities in which ongoing staff development will be provided. Each teacher has one 44-minute time slot each week for collaboration purposes and peer observations, and another 44-minute time slot is available for technology training.

## Conclusion

Our move from a traditional block schedule to a basic 4 x 4 block has been exciting. By addressing major areas of concerns, based on our research, we have made a strong beginning to a schedule we see as evolving and improving each year. We see the process of developing our block schedule as a journey, not a destination.


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Hononegah Community High School developed two models of student daily schedules that facilitate the use of the extended period into a traditional 7-period day. The key to both models is a 7-period structure and a weekly, scheduled teacher collaboration period. Both models address and provide solution to the problems of moving to an even block schedule (8 block or 4 block) while taking advantage of the strategies and techniques enhanced by the use of the extended period.

## The Process

The decision to move to an extended period schedule was made after a four-year investigation/discussion period. During this time, we determined "where we are" and "where we want to be." We identified the strengths, abilities, and skills that a graduate of Hononegah Community High School should possess. We identified the strengths and weaknesses of our traditional seven-period day. We then took the results of these conversations and combined them with the knowledge we had gained through our reading and research. This combined knowledge led us in the development of an "Evaluation Matrix." We created a matrix that contained 18 separate criteria. We then went

## Figure 1. The 7 x 1 Extended Period Schedule

Concept by Richard L. Beck, Principal, Hononegah Community High School
Concept enhanced by Hononegah Community High School Leadership Team

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | Collaboration | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| 4 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 4 |
| 5 | | | 5 | 5 |
| 6 | | | 6 | 6 |
| 7 | | | 7 | 7 |

Period Length: Monday, Thursday, Friday: 52 minutes
Tuesday, Wednesday: 95 minutes

through a process that weighted criteria. The Hononegah Community High School Leadership Team then evaluated several schedules—including the 7 x 1 and the 7 x 2. The results of this evaluation led us to take our conversation of an alternative schedule to our entire faculty.

### The Results

***The 7 x 1 extended period schedule.***

- Classes meet four times per week.
- Monday, Thursday, and Friday: All seven classes meet for 52 minutes.
- Tuesday: Periods 1, 2, 3, and 4 meet for 95 minutes.
- Wednesday: Periods 5, 6, and 7 meet for 95 minutes.
- Wednesday: Teachers begin the day with scheduled collaboration; students begin classes after a late arrival.

See Figure 1.

***The 7 x 2 extended period schedule.***

- Classes meet three times per week.
- Monday: All classes meet for 52 minutes.
- Tuesday: Periods 1, 2, 3, and 4 meet for 95 minutes.
- Wednesday: Periods 5, 6, and 7 meet for 95 minutes.
- Wednesday: Teachers begin the day with scheduled collaboration; students begin classes after a late arrival.
- Thursday: Periods 1, 2, 3, and 4 meet for 95 minutes.
- Friday: Periods 5, 6, and 7 meet for 95 minutes.
- Friday: Students are scheduled into a homeroom/activity period for the following possible activities:
  - Personalization and Adviser/Advisee activities
  - Community of Caring (our Values Program)
  - Pull-out Programs:
    * Assemblies
    * Class Meetings
    * Pictures
    * Class Rings and Announcements/Caps and Gowns, etc.
    * College Recruiters
    * Surveys
    * Standardized Testing

See Figure 2.

### Benefits of the 7-Block

The seven-block schedule was developed in response to the need to take advantage of the strategies that can be utilized with the extended—80 plus minutes—period and to allow for the following:

- *In-depth study.* Moving toward an even block schedule (8 block or 4 block) would add more classes to our students' schedules. We want to have more in-depth study in our classes, not add more classes.
- *Personalization.* This can be developed during the adviser/advisee activity during the homeroom/activity period in the 7 x 2 schedule or during the lunch period in the 7 x 1 schedule.
- *Active learning.* This concept can be developed with the extended period that will allow for a more student-centered/student-activity approach to teaching.
- *Teacher collaboration.* For effective change to take

## Figure 2. The 7 x 2 Extended Period Schedule

Concept by Richard L. Beck, Principal, Hononegah Community High School
Concept enhanced by Hononegah Community High School Leadership Team

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | Collaboration | 1 | 5 |
| 2 | 2 | 5 | 2 | Homeroom |
| 3 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 6 |
| 4 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 7 |
| 5 | | | | |
| 6 | | | | |
| 7 | | | | |

Period Length: Monday: 52 minutes; Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: 95 minutes

place, teachers must be given time for collaboration. Collaboration time must be an expectation of the teacher during the work day—all teachers must be involved in collaboration activities. The 7-block schedule enables scheduling for this activity.

- *Skills development.* Skills for the 21st century—active learning, project learning, thematic learning, core curriculum, learning styles, multiples intelligences, and the like—will be better taught with the new strategies that are enhanced with the extended period.
- *Stress Reduction.* The 7-block schedules will allow both teachers and students to prepare for fewer classes on certain days. This will reduce stress, increase the quality of student work and effort, and encourage students to become active learners.

Additionally, as we were not moving from a six or seven-period day to an eight-period day, the schedule does not affect graduation requirements, athletic eligibility, or curriculum. Media center usage and access to pupil services are also unaffected as study halls have not been eliminated. Also, the 7-block schedule facilitates the transfer of students to Hononegah. However, students transferring to Hononegah from 4-block schools may encounter problems with the 7-block schedule (a problem for all non–4-block schedules).

### Conclusion

The 7 x 1 extended period will be implemented at Hononegah Community High School during the 1998–99 school year (following a majority vote of 81.9 percent). The 1997–98 school year will be devoted to finalizing implementation plans, staff development, and curriculum planning. We are all looking forward to this exciting change.

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*Practitioner* is a bi-monthly publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 20191-1537. Telephone: (703) 860-0200; Fax: (703) 476-5432; Worldwide Web: http://www.nassp.org. Copyright 1997 by NASSP. The NASSP dues include the annual subscription rate of $4. There are no individual subscriptions. Single copies are available at $2 ($3 for nonmembers), 2–10 copies of the same issue are $1.75 each ($2.75 for nonmembers), 11–99 copies are $1.25 each ($2.25 for nonmembers), and 100 or more copies are $1.15 each ($2.15 for nonmembers). Payment must accompany orders of $15 or less.

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